MOTIVATING THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES TO PERSONAL OMNIGOD THEISM:
THE CASE FROM CLASSICAL THEISM

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Abstract. Analytic philosophers of religion typically take God to be 'the personal omniGod' – a (supernatural, immaterial) person who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, and who creates and sustains all else that exists. Analytic philosophers also tend to assume that the personal omniGod is the God of 'classical' theism. Arguably, this is a mistake. To be consistent, a classical theist or her supporter must deny that God is literally a person. They need not, however, deny the aptness of using personal language, or of thinking of God as a person or personal at the level of religious psychology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Anglophone analytic philosophers of religion typically take God to be 'the personal omniGod'—a (supernatural, immaterial) person who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, and who creates and sustains all else that exists. John Bishop and I call belief in God according to this conception 'personal omniGod theism.' Analytic philosophers of religion tend to take personal omniGod theism to be 'classical' (or traditional) theism.[1] I think this is a mistake, for reasons that will emerge. The boundaries of the personal omniGod conception may be contested or contestable, depending e.g. on how one understands the omni-properties (or their scope) or on whether they are (*de re*) necessary properties of God.[2] And so there isn't just a single personal omni-God conception, but a family of such conceptions. Nevertheless, there is widespread support for the underlying concept of God as literally *a person* who shares a number of properties with us (but to a much greater or maximal degree).[3]

There are of course alternatives to personal omniGod theism. Some are alternatives to theism if by 'theism' one means 'belief in the God of the major Abrahamic monotheistic religious traditions.' There are e.g. versions of polytheism, henotheism, and Absolute Idealism (of the sort that maintains that God is an appearance of the Absolute but not the Absolute Itself). In recent years, a number of alternatives to personal omni-God theism have been proposed that purport to be available to those *within* the Abrahamic monotheistic religious traditions. Some of these alternatives remain in the 'personalist' camp, e.g.

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1   T. J. Mawson, *The Case Against Atheism* (OUP, 2013), 26 is but one example.

2   E.g., open theists maintain God's omniscience but (unlike others) deny that it includes foreknowledge of our free actions. Nelson Pike, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (1969) maintains God's contingent goodness, and Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Macmillan, 1983), 4–5 denies that perfect power, wisdom and goodness are essential properties of the individual who is God. Some stretch the boundaries of the personal omniGod conception in other ways. E.g. Yujin Nagasawa, "A New Defence of Anselmian Theism", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 58, no. 233 (2008) replaces the idea that God has omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness understood as having maximal power, knowledge and goodness with the idea that God has the maximal consistent set of power, knowledge and goodness. Peter T. Geach, "Omnipotence", *Philosophy* 48, no. 183 (1973) rejects omnipotence (understood as the power to do all things) in favour of almightiness (power over all things).

3   To say that God is *literally* a person is to say that one can provide an *adequate positive metaphysics of the divine* by taking God to be a person or personal agent (in something like the modern sense).

Peter Forrest's 'developmental theism' and his 'personal pantheism.'[4] Others deny that God is a person (or indeed an entity of any kind), e.g. what John Bishop and I call the 'euteleological' conception of God.[5] Against the very widely held assumption that belief in a creator who is a person or personal is essential to Christianity, and indeed to theism itself, we present euteleology as an *interpretation of theism*; it is intended to be an alternative, not to theism, but to personal omniGod theism.[6]

Several reasons have been given to search for an alternative to personal omniGod theism. One motivation has been religious. On the personal omniGod conception, God's attributes are the attributes of a person (though of essentially unique and perfect status). Omnipotence ascribes to God to an unlimited degree the same sort of agential power that belongs to finite persons; omniscience, the same sort of knowing; and omnibenevolence the same sort of (moral) goodness. We grasp these divine omni-properties by extrapolating from our understanding of what it is for us to be powerful, knowledgeable and good. Some have been concerned that a God whose attributes are understood by projecting our own capacities as personal agents to infinity is a God made in *our* image, and hence *an idol*.[7] It is important to distinguish sharply the idea of the finite being infinitely extended from the idea of the Divine Infinite.[8]

A second motivation for searching for an alternative to personal omniGod theism has been primarily ethical.[9] For example, Bishop and I think that a version of the Logical Argument from Evil shows that there can be no personal omniGod.[10] Relative to certain normative ethical judgements we think it is reasonable (though not rationally obligatory) for a theist to accept, a supremely powerful being could not have perfect goodness of the sort that applies to free and responsible persons. One such judgement is that God's overall relationship to created persons would necessarily be defective if he first sustained and then defeated horrendous evil (as he does/must on the best theodicies). This norm-relative 'right relationship' Logical Argument from Evil is not understood to be an argument for outright atheism, but rather for personal omniGod atheism.[11] It motivates our search for what we think (rightly or wrongly)

4   See Peter Forrest, *Developmental Theism: From Pure Will to Unbounded Love* (OUP, 2007) and Peter Forrest, "The Personal Theist Conception of God", in *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*, ed. Andrei A. Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa (OUP, 2016).

5   See the Bibliography for a list of papers. Bishop initiated work on this alternative in a series of earlier papers. His view has evolved in significant ways since John Bishop, "How a Modest Fideism may Constrain Theistic Commitments: Exploring an Alternative to Classical Theism", *Philosophia* 35, no. 3-4 (2007). Euteleology has clear affinities with John Leslie's extreme axiarchism (see e.g. John Leslie, *Universes* (Routledge, 1989), chap. 8), which is another example of a non-personal conception of God open to Christians.

6   Brian Leftow, "Naturalistic Pantheism", in *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*, ed. Andrei A. Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa (OUP, 2016), 69–70 interprets us as thinking that the God of Western theism isn't a fit claimant for the title 'God.' We do think the personal omniGod isn't a fit claimant for the title, but dispute the assumption that the personal omniGod *is* the God of Western theism.

7   E.g., C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief.* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1960), 17–18: "If we construe divine goodness as more of the same stuff as human goodness, it's intelligible but surely isn't divine goodness and so, is idolatrous"; Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (Chapman, 1987), 1: "process theology and especially the idea of God suffering in sympathy with creation ... can be seen as a kind of idolatry"; and Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2009), 39: "the very ideas of religion as essentially supernaturalist, and of God as essentially a supernatural being, are idolatrous conceptions." The idea that a God who is 'a person,' however supreme, is improperly anthropomorphic is as old as philosophy in the West (Xenophanes, Fragment 15).

8   See e.g. Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence* (Pharos, 1993), 178.

9   There are other well-known philosophical concerns with the personal omniGod conception, e.g. that it is internally incoherent — a property or conjunction of properties loaded into it is incoherent — or that the conception is incompatible with other key claims of the tradition (e.g. that we are sometimes free).

10   See our John Bishop and Ken Perszyk, "The normatively relativised logical argument from evil", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 70, no. 2 (2011), and John Bishop and Ken Perszyk, "Concepts of God and Problems of Evil", in *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*, ed. Andrei A. Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa (OUP, 2016).

11   In a posthumously published essay (Marilyn M. Adams, "A Modest Proposal? *Caveat Emptor*! Moral Theory and Problems of Evil", in *Ethics and the Problem of Evil*, ed. James P. Sterba (Indiana Univ. Press, 2017)), Marilyn Adams takes our view very seriously. She says (p. 25): "Even if God was within divine rights in permitting or producing [horrendous evils], there is the leftover question of whether and/or how God means to be good to us after the worst has already happened. John Bishop and Ken Perszyk have pressed a still deeper question: whether a God who set us up for horrors by creating us in a world like this has exhibited perfectly loving relationality toward us. Notice that the issue here is not Plantinga's pastoral question of how it is psycho-spiritually possible for participants in the worst evils to hold on to their trust in God. Instead, Bishop and Perszyk raise the morally prior question of

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is a more philosophically and religiously adequate conception of God. In line with the first motivation (above), one guiding thought is this: If one thinks of God as the personal omniGod, and in particular thinks that God is a person in anything like the modern forensic sense, it is entirely appropriate to put God in the dock for the horrors of the world. But that's blasphemous, and so we should reject the idea of God that gives rise to it.

My main aim in this paper is to explore a third motivation for searching for an alternative to personal omniGod theism: the case from 'classical theism.' The concern here is that the personal omniGod conception is at odds with the historical tradition. To be consistent, a classical theist or her supporter must deny that God is literally a person.[12] To be clear, they (anyone) need not deny the aptness of using personal language or of thinking of God as a person or personal at the level of religious psychology. But from this it doesn't follow that God is literally a person as a matter of serious metaphysics.[13] Classical theism is associated, historically, with the likes of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Avicenna, Averroes and Maimonides. While classical theism appears to share several theses with personal omniGod theism — e.g. both maintain (in some sense) God's omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness, and a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*[14] — the former endorses a range of other attributes as essential to divinity that usually are not all accepted by the latter. These include infinity, simplicity, aseity, atemporality, (strong) immutability, and impassibility.[15] It is not surprising that (almost without exception) personal omniGod theists modify or reject some, most or all of the 'classical' attributes, for arguably they are essentially non-personal, and so classical theism and personal omniGod theism are incompatible with one another.

Many personal omniGod theists presumably agree with the incompatibility claim, and so given their absolute commitment to a robust conception of God's personhood, they reject classical theism.[16] On the other hand, those analytic philosophers of religion who are sympathetic or attracted to classical theism tend to admit (in varying degrees) some (serious) tensions with personal omniGod theism. They typically modify (i.e. give a weaker reading of) one or more of the classical divine attributes and abandon others (on the ground that they are incoherent); in some cases they reject the standard personal omniGod understanding of perfect goodness.[17] They end up with a very stretched or thin sense of 'personhood,' and I think they would do better to reject the idea that God is literally a person.

The case for the incompatibility of personal omniGod theism and classical theism rests largely on the claim that some (at least one) of the classical divine attributes are incompatible with being a person. Pressure also comes from the classical emphasis on God's 'otherness' and transcendence. This classical emphasis is arguably what leads to endorsing the classical attributes in the first place. Classical understandings of what look to be the 'personal' attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence also exert pressure on the idea that God is literally a person. Debates among personal omniGod theorists[18] themselves over the analysis of the omni-properties reveal tensions in the idea that the omni-properties are properties of a person . Let us consider these matters in more detail.

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whether a God who sets us up for horrors by creating us in a world like this, is trustworthy, whether God's track record in putting us in harm's way and not rescuing us takes God out of the category of people to whom it is reasonable to entrust oneself as to a parent or intimate friend. Such questions take us to the heart of relationship ethics, to the ethics of abandonment and betrayal, forgiveness and reconciliation."

12   Rogers is representative of the view I oppose when she says: "The classical tradition is adamant that God is indeed a person." Katherin A. Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2000), 65.

13   Nor am I saying that they must deny the Trinity.

14   If endorsing a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is a defining feature of both personal omniGod and classical theism, process theism would seem to an alternative to both. Process theists also significantly restrict, if not abandon, omnipotence.

15   While there isn't just a single conception that counts as *the* 'classical' conception of God, I take 'classical theism' to be (roughly) belief in one God that has or is identical with these attributes (or 'enough' of them) and creates and sustains all else that exists.

16   Open theism is a prime example.

17   E.g. Marilyn M. Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1999).

18   A personal omniGod theorist is one who thinks that the personal omniGod conception is the best conception of the divine; she needn't of course be a personal omniGod theist.

II. PERSONAL OMNIGOD AND CLASSICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE OMNI-PROPERTIES

According to Alvin Plantinga, "*God* is the premier person, the first and chief exemplar of personhood. … [W]e men and women are image bearers of God, and the properties most important for an understanding of our personhood are properties we share with him."[19] Omnipotence thus ascribes to God to a maximal degree (or maximal degree consistent with his other properties) the same sort of agential power that belongs to us, and we grasp God's being all-powerful by extrapolation from our understanding of what it is for us to have power. And *mutatis mutandis* for omniscience and omnibenevolence.

For contemporary analytic philosophers of religion, omnipotence is typically cashed out in terms of the ability to *do* things or to *bring about* (actualise) states of affairs. Now, on the face of it, there doesn't seem to be anything incoherent about the notion of a person who can do everything (or bring about every state of affairs) it is possible to do or bring about.[20] But then it seems that we should agree that having this property might deserve to be described as being omnipotent, and so there is no incoherence in the notion of omnipotence as a personal attribute (and an attribute of a perfect person). And *mutatis mutandis* for omniscience and omnibenevolence. These omni-properties seem most naturally construed as properties of a personal agent, and indeed personal omniGod theists will presumably insist that they can *only* be properties of a person.

But are they (we) talking about omnipotence, omniscience and perfect goodness *in the classical sense*? I don't think so. To begin to see why, consider omnipotence. From a classical point of view, it is surely problematic — some might even say scandalous — to see God's power as merely or even primarily the ability to *do* things, with God's power being at the extreme end of a spectrum where he has vastly more power than other persons by virtue of being able to do everything it is logically possible to do (or possible for a being of his nature to do). This seems to conflate the important distinction noted earlier between the finite infinitely extended and the theological (divine) infinite.

Omnipotent God, understood classically, is not a super-powerful causal agent amongst or alongside other agents. While personal omniGod theists will quickly insist that that they are not treating God as *just* another agent or as your "common or garden variety" personal agent, God is still a personal agent (albeit unique and perfect). And this is typically taken to be the interpretation of classical theism. But this isn't at all obvious or straightforward. Consider e.g. creation *ex nihilo*. Arguably, creating *ex nihilo* is on an entirely different level or plane of power altogether, not reducible to, or best understood in terms of, the causal power of an agent — however great they might be. Strictly speaking, it doesn't seem accurate to say that God *does* things (anything) in creating *ex nihilo*. Creation *ex nihilo* certainly cannot be understood along the lines of any kind of ordinary change (where there is some pre-existing material or some passive potency to be acted upon), and it just seems to be a mistake (at the level of metaphysical understanding) to treat God as a personal causal agent.[21]

Now, I do not deny that there is historical evidence in favour of the standard contemporary sense of omnipotence, understood as the capacity to *do* all (possible) things or to *bring about* (actualise) everything it is logically possible to bring about. Van den Brink distinguishes three senses or meanings of 'omnipotence' based on a close examination of the history of words denoting God's power in different classical languages.[22] Two senses or meanings are (1) "God's power as universal dominion and authority

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19 Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers", *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984): 265.

20 Let's leave aside complications such as the Stone Paradox.

21 Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (Continuum, 2006), 61–62 warns against "supposing that God is nothing but an inhabitant of the universe (albeit an invisible inhabitant) … One might, of course, say that the person God is differs significantly from the persons that people are … that he is more powerful or more knowledgeable than other persons. Yet it would still remain the case that this extraordinary person would be nothing more than that — an extraordinary person, one of a kind, hardly the Creator of the Universe, hardly that which accounts for there being any world at all, for there being something rather than nothing."

22 van den Brink, *Almighty God*, 48–49.

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over all and everything" — which looks like Peter Geach's 'almightiness' (power *over* all things) instead of 'omnipotence' (power to *do* all things) — and (2) "God's power as shown in the creation and preservation of the world."[23] The third sense or meaning van den Brink identifies is the capacity to do all (possible) things. This sense, he says, was built into the Latin word '*omnipotens*', but is foreign to the Greek '*pantokrator*.' I would not, then, go so far as to say that the 'ability to do (bring about) all (possible) things' sense of omnipotence is a distortion of classical Christian thought,[24] at least as long as God does not become another item in the world, albeit more exalted. But it isn't the only, or even the primary, sense.[25, 26]

I also think it's important to note that if or when classical theists have a 'doing' or 'bringing about' sense of God's power in mind, it seems that there's also an important qualitative, not quantitative, sense of the 'omni' prefix at play. Omnipotence (maximal power) may only require a single act. (Similarly, maximal goodness may only require a single good or right act). In addition, God would presumably be wholly (omni-) perfect in power (and goodness/being) without doing or bringing about anything.

Omnibenevolence is typically understood by personal omniGod theists to ascribe to God to an unlimited degree the same kind of goodness — moral goodness — that belongs to finite persons. Though I am not a scholar of classical theism, I think it is pretty clear that this is not what classical theists really mean by God's perfect goodness. Whatever is meant, positively, they do not think that God is literally a moral agent who behaves exceedingly well, acts in perfect accordance with moral norms and discharges moral duties and obligations perfectly.[27]

Some personal omniGod theists themselves deny that God's goodness is moral goodness. I am thinking in particular here of the late Marilyn Adams. Many think that (to use her words) "to be personal is to share eligibility for moral evaluation and to be networked by rights and obligations." She thinks God is a personal agent-cause who does or produces things in creating and sustaining the world. But she rejects the idea that God is a moral agent and that God's perfect goodness is moral goodness/perfection; she denies that divine justice is a function of fulfilling moral obligations to creatures. These denials are in the spirit if not letter of classical theism. But in that case, I lose a grip on the idea that God is literally a person (in the modern forensic sense) and think that personhood is the wrong category for the divine. If God is a personal agent-cause who produces the world and interacts in or with it, I think God is subject to moral evaluation. Adams seems to take personal agency in the contemporary sense to be or to mean "intelligent voluntary agency."[28] If intelligent voluntary agency doesn't imply responsible agency in the forensic sense, I think it's best to abandon the idea that God is literally a person. Separating out responsibility and accountability (according to our best theory of moral goodness) from acting by will and intel-

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23   The first, says Van den Brink, goes back to the Septuagint and is found in the early patristic literature; the second, especially the notion of sustaining power, was present in the first century B.C. and became prominent among the Church Fathers.

24   Aquinas certainly uses that language in e.g. ST, I, Q.25. But, again, one needn't reject the *language* of God 'doing things,' for how else can we, who are personal agents, talk about divine action? In addition, the language and examples used in talking about God's creative power are often more a matter of emanation (like the sun heating things) than of ordinary productive causes (like an artist doing things to produce artifacts).

25   In this connection, didn't Augustine occasionally use '*omnitenens*' in place of '*omnipotens*', which reflects the meaning of '*pantokrator*'?

26   I find it revealing that the repeated biblical assertion that "nothing is impossible (or too hard) for thee [God]" always (?) occurs in the context of prayer and prophecy, or in a liturgical setting. This suggests that it may be necessary, from the point of view of religious psychology, to think of God as a person who can do all (good) things (that are possible), even though it may be false at the level of metaphysical reality that God is a person with that ability. Saying that nothing good is impossible with God is typically addressed to those tempted to despair of a good outcome or of any prospects for redemption.

27   I am taking sides here with the likes of Brian Davies and Herbert McCabe. See e.g. Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem*, and Brian Davies, "Is God a Moral Agent?", in *Whose God? Which Tradition? The Nature of Belief in God*, ed. Dewi Z. Phillips (Ashgate, 2008). Thomas Williams, "Introduction to Classical Theism", in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, ed. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (Springer, 2013), 96, says that classical theists don't think of perfect goodness as a matter of the extent of God's goodness (as 'omni' suggests); nor do they think of it as maximizing desirable states (as 'benevolence' suggests, especially understood on consequentialist lines). Like most others, Williams points out the close association of perfection in goodness with perfection in being.

28   She is certainly not alone in this. Brian Leftow, *Time and eternity* (Cornell Univ. Press, 2009), 299 thinks that intellect (knowledge) and will are all that's needed for personhood for philosophical and religious purposes.

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lect seems to require moving to an alternative morality. This is precisely what Adams does in her appeal to the honour code. But mustn't one who acts by will and intellect be such that some standards for acting well and wisely apply? If not, I lose a grip on the concept of a person and concept of goodness *qua* person.

III. OMNI-PROPERTIES AND PERSONHOOD: CONTEMPORARY DEBATES REVEAL TENSIONS

Leaving aside (for the moment) classical theism, debates among personal omniGod theorists themselves over the analysis of omni-properties reveal tensions in understanding them as attributes of a (perfect) person. Consider e.g. the way analytic philosophers of religion typically go about analysing (or defining) omnipotence. They start with the suggestion that an omnipotent being can do (bring about) anything. Then they quickly point out that, with perhaps the exception of Descartes, no one in the history of (Western) philosophy has ever seriously thought that an omnipotent being (God) should be able to do what is logically impossible. Then they consider the suggestion that being omnipotent should be understood as to the ability to do whatever is logically possible. That seems promising because it would mark a clear difference in power between an omnipotent being (if there is one) and finite persons like us who are clearly non-omnipotent. But then it's pointed out that there are a number of things that are logically possible to do (bring about) — for, after all, we do them — which an omnipotent being, at least or especially if we are talking about God, cannot do. The inability to do some of these things seems to be a consequence of the kind of being God is supposed to be, viz. an immaterial being. Other logically possible things it seems God cannot do (if he is omnipotent) — for example, make an object too heavy for its maker to lift — is arguably a consequence of God having unlimited power in relevant respects (e.g. having both stone-creating and stone-lifting powers to an unlimited degree). Fine, but can an omnipotent being (God) do what is morally wrong (sin)? Not if that being is (necessarily, *de re*) perfectly good (impeccable). The inability to do what is wrong (sin) is, some say, no genuine limitation and so doesn't count against being omnipotent because it is a consequence of having unlimited power over wrong-doing (sin). The trick here (and elsewhere), it seems, is to take what looks like a non-logical limitation (for after all, we do what is wrong, and so it is logically possible to do what is wrong) and argue that it ends up being a logical limitation (and hence no genuine limitation) for a being with God's supposed nature. Of course, defining or understanding omnipotence in terms of the ability to do whatever is logically possible to do, given one's nature (essential properties), has led to further difficulties (McEar). But even supposing that this problem can be evaded (by adding another suitably worded clause to one's definition of omnipotence), there seems to be a serious tension in allowing an omnipotent being to be unable to do various things that are themselves logically possible. The intuition many seem to have had is that an omnipotent being should have at least as much power as we who are clearly non-omnipotent have.[29] If there are things that are possible to do because we (finite persons) actually do them, shouldn't an omnipotent God be able to do them too if relevantly like us in being a person?[30]

The idea of placing constraints or limitations on God's power (or goodness or knowledge for that matter) seems to be (at least) in tension with his being a perfect or infinite person, where being 'infinite' is taken to mean having *no* limitations. If one complains that there's no problem 'limiting' God to not being able to do the impossible because logical limitations aren't real limitations, the point is that this seems to work only if the notion of an unlimited (infinite) person is coherent to begin with, and that's what may be (and for me, is) in question. Consider the debate over whether omnipotence is compatible with perfect (essential) moral goodness (impeccability). One widespread intuition is that, if God is to be like us in being a

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29   E.g., Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Temple Univ. Press, 1990), chap. 12, presses this intuition in arguing for the incoherence of omnipotence. Pike ("Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin") and Geach ("Omnipotence") also seemed to share this intuition. For the contrary intuition, see Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz, "Omnipotence", in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper and Philip L. Quinn (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

30   A parallel story applies to analyses of omniscience. Many seem to have the intuition that if God is literally a person, he would know at least as much as we who are non-omniscient know. See Martin (chap. 12) for discussion of this intuition, which figures into some arguments against the compatibility of omniscience with perfect goodness and with omnipotence.

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person and sharing many properties with us (though to a much greater or maximal degree), it is better for God to be able to do what's wrong but resist than to be logically incapable of doing what's wrong.[31] There is, however, a less common intuition that it would be better for us to be (logically) unable to even entertain wicked thoughts (much less be capable of acting on them). If it is further suggested that hard-fought moral goodness may be great-making for (finite) beings like us, but isn't great-making for a being who is morally perfect, a standard reply is to the effect that this stretches the notion of what it is to be a person too far. Is it really logically possible for a person to be essentially unable to do what's wrong?

IV. THE CLASSICAL EMPHASIS ON GOD'S 'OTHERNESS' AND TRANSCENDENCE

Nothing seems more central for classical theism than the ontological distinction between the Creator and creation. The emphasis in classical theism on God's 'otherness' and transcendence puts pressure on the idea that God is literally a person. Taking otherness and transcendence too far can lead to an objectionable super-naturalism — the idea that God is 'up above' or 'out there' in a separate realm. That's exactly what happens if God is literally a person. But this seems to be an unfair caricature of classical theism.[32] I take the 'otherness' of God to be categorial — a claim that God is in a different category from anything in reality. I take the distinction between Creator and creation apophatically: you can't take any thing in creation/Reality, even the whole of Reality, and say *that* is God.

Denying God's personhood doesn't entail that God is less than a person. Far from de-personalising God in the sense of making God out to be less than a person, on a par e.g. with an impersonal force like gravity or energy, a non-personal view may exalt God by making proper recognition of God's otherness and transcendence. When you embrace a non-personal metaphysics of the divine, you can free yourself from a range of problems associated with talking personal language about God literally. Ontological supremacy (greatness) needn't be personal or a person. However lofty persons are or may be in the 'chain (hierarchy) of being,' personhood seems 'too small' or 'not high enough' for the creator and sustainer of all that exists. The assumption that personal being is the highest (possible) form of being arguably arises from an untoward anthropomorphic projection. One option in denying that God is a person is to say that God is not less than a person but is supra- or trans-personal. This 'above' or 'beyond' sense of being 'more than a person' needn't imply being at least a person (as in being fully personal but not a mere person).[33] The inference from not being less personal (on which all sides in this debate appear to agree) to being (at least) a person (who has intentions, deliberates, makes decisions, etc.) is not legitimate.[34]

Some who say that God is personal, or even that God is a person, may be making a point that is perfectly consistent with the denial that God is a personal agent. There is an apophatic reading: saying that God is personal or a person might simply be a disguised way of saying only what God is *not* — that God is *not* impersonal, or God is *not* less than a person. This apophatic reading is something classical theists such as Maimonides would applaud.

Now, it's one thing to say that some classical theists would applaud an apophatic reading of the claim that God is a person. But it's another thing to make the stronger claim that classical theism is inconsistent with divine personhood. Is there any good reason to think that?

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31 This is often connected with the idea, which e.g. Pike ("Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin") held, that one cannot be (morally) praiseworthy for not doing what's wrong if one is (logically) unable to do it, as well as the idea that if God is a libertarian free agent (like us), then God must be able to refrain from doing what is good. An important part of the traditional Chalcedonian doctrine of the Incarnation is that Jesus was like us in all respects but sin. If Jesus was logically incapable of giving in to temptation, could he really have been tempted (short of not knowing that he was divine)? See Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Wipf and Stock, 2001), chap. 6, for further discussion.

32 Think e.g. about the classical emphasis on and understandings of omnipresence and biblical texts related to it.

33 Huw P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (Macmillan, 1971), 42, thinks that a non-personal form of being that is not sub-personal is meaningless. C. S. Evans and R. Z. Manis, *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 40 think it isn't clear what being 'more than personal' would be like. I think this is one place where divine ineffability/incomprehensibility might rightly come into play.

34 Cf. McCabe, *God Matters*, 9.

V. CLASSICAL DIVINE ATTRIBUTES AND PERSONHOOD

The classical emphasis on God's otherness and transcendence is very closely related to the classical divine attributes. In fact, it seems that the classical attributes ground or constitute the classical understanding of God's otherness and transcendence.[35] These classical attributes distinguish God from every thing or entity or individual that exists. This is particularly the case with infinity, simplicity and aseity.[36] These attributes seem to be mutually entailing, and each seems to entail the remaining classical attributes (atemporality, immutability, impassibility, etc.) Some classical theists start with aseity or simplicity, while others start with infinity and derive the others.

The English word 'person' and its cognates derive from the Latin '*persona*' (the translation of the Greek '*prosopon*', meaning 'face'), which originally referred to a mask worn by an actor in a theatre or to an actor's role. In the course of Trinitarian controversies, the meaning or connotation shifted, with Latin-speaking theologians using '*persona*' (instead of '*substantia*') as the equivalent of the Greek '*hypostatis*' (literally, 'a standing under').[37] Yet the three 'persons' of the Trinity are not discrete individual substances or centers of consciousness that stand next to each other; they are not persons in anything like the modern sense.[38] Boethius's later definition of a person is "an individual substance of a rational nature." This definition became highly influential in Western philosophy, though Cardinal Ratzinger says that it "cannot clarify anything about the Trinity or Christology."[39] Though it was implicit in the Boethian definition, consciousness, and in particular self-consciousness, came to the forefront after Descartes. The personal omniGod looks very much like a Cartesian substance. Locke defines a person as "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself … 'Person'…is a forensic term, appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of a law, and happiness and misery."[40] This forensic sense seems to be our modern sense of the term 'person': A person is a rational agent capable of bearing moral responsibility for outcomes that occur through his or her agency. This forensic sense of 'person' didn't start with Locke, but goes back to ancient Rome: persons had rights and there were obligations and duties to or between them; slaves were not (legal) persons.

Can the classical divine attributes really be attributes of a person (in anything like our modern sense)? They cannot apply to finite persons, and so they may seem to be essentially non-personal attributes.

Consider infinity. The English word 'infinite' and its cognates derive from the Latin '*infinitas*' — '*in*' = 'not' and '*finis*' = 'limit,' 'boundary,' etc. What is infinite is what is not limited, not bounded. On this reading, the word 'infinite' seems primarily to have a negative or apophatic meaning.

The claim that God is infinite goes back at least as far as Clement of Alexandria at the end of the second century A.D. It is found in Latin writers in the early third century. It is affirmed in the Augsburg Confession (art. 1), the Belgic Confession (art. 1) and the Westminster Confession (ch. 2); and it is *de fide* for Roman Catholics. From at least the middle of the thirteenth century, it was common to say that God's being or essence is infinite, in the sense of being unlimited or complete or perfect.[41] This is not a mathematical or quantitative sense of 'infinity.' One reason is that the mathematical infinite is an extension of the finite; it is

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35 See Peter Weigel, *Aquinas on Simplicity: An Investigation into the Foundations of his Philosophical Theology.* (Peter Lang, 2018), 13–15 on simplicity as constituting the traditional conception of divine transcendence.

36 Numbers, if they exist, are atemporal, immutable, and impassible. Simplicity seems to capture the sense of otherness/transcendence as what is not ontologically on a par with any thing or kind in the world. Aseity seems to capture the sense of otherness/transcendence as what is not dependent on anything in the world. For classical theists, God's otherness/transcendence is also understood in terms of ineffability or incomprehensibility.

37 See Clement C. J. Webb, *God and Personality* (Allen & Unwin, [1918] 1971), 35–60 for a discussion of the history and shifting meaning of 'person' and its relation to the Greek and Latin terms with which it has been associated.

38 See Cardinal J. Ratzinger, "Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology", *Communio*, no. 17 (1990), for an interesting discussion.

39 *Ibid.*, 448.

40 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Clarendon Press, 1979), Book II, chap. 27, sections 9 and 26.

41 See Leo Sweeney, *Divine Infinity in Greek and Medieval Thought* (Lang, 1992), chaps. 18 and 19.

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constructed out of a finite collection. But that is totally inappropriate or inapplicable to the divine (given God's otherness and transcendence).

For Aquinas, the infinity (completeness, perfection) of God's being or essence is grounded in God's being Pure Act, free from (not limited by) any potentiality. This is closely related to, if not indistinguishable from, the idea that God is infinite (not limited) in the sense of being completely independent of anything outside Godself, which is (or is part of) the classical doctrine of God's aseity. And the absence of any composition of potency and act is part of the doctrine of divine simplicity. Being infinite (unlimited) seems to entail (and be entailed by) an absence of any composition, given that composition implies the possibility of limitation. What is infinite and simple in the sense of lacking any limits or composition would also lack temporal (and spatial) parts or extension, intrinsic accidental properties (and strictly any distinct essential properties either), and any real distinction between essence and existence. If God were composed of essence and existence, God would stand in need of something to add existence to his essence, which would (*per impossibile*) be what explains his existence and be his creator.

It can be no accident that having 'established' the existence of God (in the "Five Ways") in *ST*, I, Q. 2, a. 3, Aquinas immediately turns in Q. 3 and following to the simplicity of God. The doctrine of divine simplicity is essential to God's being the transcendent creator *ex nihilo*, the First Cause on which everything that exists depends and whose existence he thinks he just established in the preceding question. Simplicity (or aseity) and the attributes that follow from them tell us what God is not or cannot be if he is really the transcendent creator, the First Cause. To say that there is no real distinction in God between essence and existence is to say that God is not an instance of some kind. God is not this particular individual or substance as opposed to that particular individual or substance. Since God, being simple, does not exhibit the composition of substance and attribute, God does not strictly possess distinctive attributes, and is not distinct from, his attributes. What is infinite and simple would thus also be atemporal in the sense of being timeless. What is sempiternal (everlasting) would not be limited insofar as it would be without beginning or end, but it would have an inner boundary dividing its past from its future, and so still be limited. What is (essentially) infinite, simple and atemporal would also be immutable — it could not be subject to any change of intrinsic properties. And it would also seem to follow from this (or God's aseity) that God is impassible, i.e. unable 'to suffer' in the sense of being causally affected by anything. The classical divine attributes thus constitute the classical understanding of God's otherness and transcendence. They distinguish God from every thing or entity or individual that exists. I haven't said "from every *other* thing or entity." for arguably God isn't a person because the classical attributes entail that God isn't a thing or entity of any kind.

Persons seem to be essentially limited in ever so many ways. They enter into reciprocal, give-and-take relationships with other people, in which there are varying degrees of risk and vulnerability and dependency on both sides, where they are subject to change and so are in time. Free and rational agency is often said to be essential to personhood, but the sort of self-determination involved in free agency seems to imply the actualisation of various (inner) potentialities and having capacities (including for many the ability to do otherwise) that are exercised in the context of various limitations. None of this can strictly apply to an essentially infinite (unlimited), simple, atemporal, (strongly) immutable, impassible God.

For those who want to maintain the compatibility of all the classical divine attributes and personal omniGod theism, I think there are two main lines of reply.[42] The first is to concede that God is or may not strictly be *a person*, but insist that God is *personal* — personal in the sense of being more like a person than anything else or more like a person than a non-person. Being like a person, rather than being a person, can come in degrees. Something may not be very person-like at all and still be more like a person than anything else (or a non-person). A single shared characteristic may be enough. If this delivers too weak a sense of being 'person-like,' possessing one (or more) important characteristic(s) of 'the right sort,' e.g. intellect and will, may be enough. And so some might be happy to say that God may not strictly

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42   I ignore others, e.g. denying entailment claims between some of the attributes, or reinterpreting (i.e. weakening) an attribute (e.g. immutability) to try to make it compatible with being a person.

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be a person, but he's personal insofar as he possesses or exercises intellect and will. Isn't this all classical *and* personal omniGod theists really need?

Well, some may not think that being a person and being personal can be neatly separated. To say that God is personal, they might say, just is to say that God is a person to whom it is appropriate to ascribe at least a restricted range of properties. For some, possessing intellect and will is sufficient for being a person. But either way, it looks as if God is being described as personal, or as a person, in a very restricted sense, a sense which isn't enough for personal omniGod theists (at least for religious purposes).[43] I am thinking e.g. of those (including open theists) who insist that God is personal in a robust sense that includes the ability to enter into two-way, give-and-take relationships with persons other than himself. This doesn't seem possible on a very thin sense of being personal or person-like. The sense, if any, in which a simple, infinite, atemporal personal being can exercise intellect and will is rather thin or stretched because few, if any, of the things we ordinarily say about persons using or exercising their intellect or will could apply to such a being. The key point is that what's needed for personal omniGod theism is a sense of being personal (or being a person) that is robust enough to give you a metaphysics of divine personal agent causation doing things in the way ordinary agent causes do or produce things. But you aren't going to get that on classical theism. Ascribing intellect and will (and even personhood) to God analogically isn't enough.

In addition, while ascribing a very restricted set of properties to God may warrant God's 'being personal' or 'like a person' if the properties are having/exercising intellect and will, this seems to imply that God is a being who literally has (some) properties of the sort that (finite) persons have. But it doesn't appear that classical theists can really say this given the doctrine of divine simplicity. While classical theists might say that there are truths that hold about God which can only be expressed by using personal *language*, understood analogically, e.g. that God wills, it doesn't follow from this that they think God is a person or personal agent as a matter of serious metaphysics.

A second reply for those who want to maintain the compatibility of the classical attributes and personal omniGod theism goes something like this: "You haven't shown that God is not or cannot be a person on the classical conception. Of course nothing (and so not even God) can have the classical attributes and be a *finite* person, but that doesn't begin to show that the classical God isn't or can't be a *perfect person*. God is the perfect person; we are but pale imitations."[44]

I have several responses to this. Classical theists don't of course think of God as a finite person. At the level of metaphysical understanding, do they really think of God as a person, a perfect person, who possesses the classical divine attributes? So far as I'm aware, Aquinas rarely uses the term 'attribute' ('*attributa*' or '*essentia attributa*') to refer to God's 'properties.'[45] If not, why not? Presumably because of his doctrine of divine simplicity—using 'attribute' suggests a composition of substance and attribute. Think again about

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43 See Alston's admission in *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), 101.

44 Cf e.g. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (T & T Clark, 1936), 272: "The real person is not man but God. It is not God who is a person by extension, but we." Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics, Vol. 1.* (Lutterworth Press, 1949), 140: "The question whether the application of the idea of a 'person' to God is an anthropomorphism receives a remarkable answer from the standpoint of the Biblical idea of God. The question is not whether *God* is personality, but whether man is. It is not the personal being of God which is 'anthropomorphic', but, conversely, the personal being of man is a 'theomorphism'. God alone is truly Person; man is only person in a symbolic way, as a reflection of God, as the *Imago Dei*."

45 When he does, is it always in a Trinitarian context? When Aquinas (or others) apply 'person(s)' to God in this context, it cannot be understood in the modern sense. Aquinas sharply separates the question of the unity (oneness) of God from the Trinitarian nature of God (e.g. ST III, 3, 3, ad. 1). When he says "God is a (one) person," in context he is referring to the unity of God and not using 'person' in anything like our modern sense. In ST I, 29, 3, Aquinas does say that 'person' is fittingly applied to God—he knows he has to apply the term in some sense given the Athanasian Creed. He says it is fittingly applied not as it is to creatures but in a more excellent way, which may suggest it is understood as trans- or supra-personal. Though the word 'person' isn't applied to God in Scripture, personal language is used throughout to refer to God. Yes, indeed, but recall the distinction between personal language and metaphysical understanding. We're also told that 'person' signifies high dignity (note the etymology of the English 'parson') and so applies to the dignity of the divine nature. I needn't deny an honorific use of 'person.' He also says that some say that Boethius's definition is not a definition of 'person' in the sense in which we speak of persons in God, and he notes Richard of St. Victor's amended definition ("the incommunicable existence of the divine nature"). None of this seems able to deliver the robust personal agency that personal omniGod theists are looking for.

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the classical understanding of God's otherness and transcendence and the classical 'attributes' that underpin or constitute it. The classical 'attributes' are not (positive) determinations of God's being. Rather, they tell us what God is not. They distance God from anything created; they are negations of attributes of created things, including (finite) persons. If we focus in particular on infinity, simplicity and aseity, can 'something' that lacks any limitations, any composition, and exists totally independently of anything else best be understood (metaphysically) as a person? Is *actus purus*, *ipsum esse*, *ipsum esse subsistens*, *esse purum*, *esse tantum* really a person (perfect person)? Arguably, for Aquinas and for classical theism in general, God isn't (as a matter of serious metaphysics) a person of any sort because God isn't an entity (*ens*) or thing that is (*id quod est*) of any kind!

Does the *imago dei* idea really support the notion of God's being in some sense *the* Person? From a theological perspective, human personhood is an 'imaging' of divine perfection and is dependent on or derives from God; God is the source or ground of our personhood. Classical theism will certainly agree with this. But this can be accounted for, and arguably better accounted for, without taking God to be literally a person or the paradigmatic or perfect person. The inference form "x is an image of y; x is a F; therefore, y is a F" is invalid. We, who are persons, can be created in God's 'image and likeness' without it following that God is a person or instance of the kind *person*. The idea that God is the (perfect) person and we are but pale imitations makes God out to be the best instance of the kind *person*, but this crashes head first into the doctrine of divine simplicity.[46] Recall too the Platonic question whether the F is F (e.g. whether the (Form) Good is good). An affirmative answer leads straight into the 'third man' regress. So even if there is a legitimate sense in which God is *the* Person, we should deny that God is *a person*.[47]

Personal omniGod theists (perhaps open theists in particular) often complain about the Hellenization of classical theism. I think it is ironic that *they* may be the ones guilty of inappropriately relying on a Greek substance metaphysics in thinking that God is literally a person or personal.[48]

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46   Cf. Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil* (OUP, 2011), 56.
47   For Aquinas, Being Itself is not a being.
48   I am indebted to John Bishop for many points in this essay. I also thank Thomas Schärtl and the other participants at the "Analytic Theology and the Nature of God: Advancing and Challenging Classical Theism Conference" for their comments.

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